

## Accounting For the Waves of International Terrorism

By Dipak K. Gupta

“Without the pen of Pain, the swords of Washington would have been wielded in vain.”

- John Adams

**A**dvancements in sciences come through painstaking observations. Scientists’ astute observations of the seemingly chaotic world pave the way for what is known as “knowledge creep.” Terrorism research is certainly no exception to this rule. One of David Rapoport’s singular contributions to our advancement of knowledge has been his articulation of the four waves of international terrorism. Rapoport (2006:10) defines waves with three characteristics: a) a cycle of activities characterized by expansion and contraction phases, b) covering multiple nations, and c) “driven by a common predominant energy that shapes the participating groups’ characteristics and mutual relationships.” By studying the history of terrorism since the 1880s, Professor Rapoport identifies four distinct waves fueled by common ideological fervor emanating from anarchism, anti-colonialism, socialism, and religious fundamentalism, respectively, with the first three waves lasting roughly 40 years each.

Although the “wave” theory has gained a firm footing in the extant literature on terrorism (Sageman 2008a), to my knowledge, not much effort has gone into the examination of the causes of, and the process by which mega ideas saturate nearly every corner of the earth. By drawing upon some of the current research in the areas of business, advertisement, and marketing, we can discern some patterns that can shed important light onto why certain ideas seem to “infect” a large number of people across history, culture, and geography. However, before we delve into the question of *how*, let me address the question of *why* people follow these mega-trends of ideas.

### The Why of the Mega-trends

If the global spread of political ideas seems surprising we should note how other ideas freely flow and inundate our societies. From fashions to toys -- bellbottom pants to cabbage patch dolls -- trends suddenly appear from nowhere. Most young men and women succumb to the craze and, when the fickle fashion ebbs, the photographs of their younger days become a source of infinite amusement to their children a generation later.

In the Western cultural ethos, the idea of individualism is pervasive. In our daily affairs the assumption of self-utility maximizing individuals as islands of rational calculation, independent of community, culture, or creed, becomes self-evident truth. In our unquestioned assumption of fundamental human nature, the picture of the me-centric individual, in the words of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1970: xi), becomes a “positive consciousness of knowledge,” which he defines as “a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientists and yet is a part of scientific discourse.” Despite this conscious and unconscious acceptance of basic human nature, current advancements in the fields of experimental psychology (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984; Haidt, 2006) evolutionary biology (de Waal, 2006), and cognitive sciences (Damasio, 1994; Pinker, 2002) clearly demonstrate the importance of group behavior in our decision-making processes. Even economists, the primary proponents of the assumption of self-utility maximization, who typically are disdainful of those who might contaminate the concept of human rationality with history, culture or psychology (Becker, 1996; Lerner, 2007), are becoming cognizant of the importance of group psychology and interdependent utility functions (Frank, 1998). This diverse body of research clearly demonstrates that as social beings, we all crave to belong to groups and, when we do, we derive great satisfaction by adhering to their explicit rules and implicit norms. We are happy, being altruistic toward members of our chosen groups and opposing, sometimes violently, the rival groups. In fact, in the Maslovian (Maslow, 1968) hierarchy of needs, the need to belong is second only to the physical needs of keeping our bodies and soul together.

Furthermore, people follow cultural dictates not only because they generate personal utility, but also because through their “doing,” they “become” somebody (Schuessler, 2000). So when we choose to wear a certain fashion, buy a certain toy, or drive a certain car, we not only derive pleasure that the consumed goods generate for us (the instrumental part of our demand), they also help us establish our identity as members of our chosen groups. Similar to these consumers, the participants in a global terrorist movement, beyond satisfying their own personal needs -- varying from power, prestige, monetary gains, salvation, or even the 72 virgins in

heaven -- *become* the person they want to be as members of the group, in which they claim membership. As a result, when an idea gains momentum, the number of people seeking its affiliation by being part of the community increases.

Therefore, Hoffman (1998) is correct in asserting that when people join dissident organizations and take part in collective violence, which we now commonly define as “terrorism,” they act not so much upon their private motivations, but out of a broad community concern. In other words, in their own minds all political terrorists are altruists. This fundamental difference in motivation distinguishes terrorists from common criminals, who are motivated only by their personal gratification (Gupta 2008). Our natural proclivity to form groups and work for their collective welfare is biologically imprinted in us, which accounts for the human need to join global trends of all sorts, including waves of international terrorism.

Let us now turn our attention to the process by which the ideas spread.

## How Do Ideas Spread?

Journalist Malcolm Gladwell, in his bestselling book (2002) asks an important question: How do ideas spread? How do we arrive at the tipping point, after which, a new idea, a fad, a fashion, or an ideology floods the world? Gladwell, studied the success of businesses like the popular footwear, Hush Puppies and children’s shows like *Sesame Street*. When we examine the process by which a wave of international terrorism spreads throughout the globe, we find that this is the same process by which ideas spread, some ending up being global others remaining localized, some making great impacts, most others disappearing within a very short time. Gladwell’s analysis of the processes by which little things can make a big difference discerns the workings of three broad forces: i) the messenger(s), ii) the message and iii) the context.

### *The messenger(s):*

The social theories of terrorism and political violence argue that gross imbalances within the social structure, such as poverty, income inequality, and asymmetry in power lead to violence. However, when these factors are put to empirical tests they, despite the age-old assertion of their salience, produce only ambiguous results or weak correlations. The reason for these puzzling results rests with the fact that the factors of deprivation – absolute or relative – only serve as the necessary conditions for social unrest. For the sufficient reason, we must look into the role that “political entrepreneurs” play to translate the grievances into concrete actions by framing the issues in a way that clearly identifies the boundaries of the aggrieved community and its offending group (Gupta 2008). The clear identification of the “us” and “them” creates conditions to overcome the natural bias toward free-riding and overcome the collective action problem (Olson, 1968).

Gladwell, for instance, makes a finer distinction within the category of “political entrepreneurs,” whom he calls, the *connectors*, the *mavens*, and the *salesmen*. The connectors are the primary nodes of a communication network. These are the people who know a lot of people and are known by a lot of people by dint of who they are (position, power, money, etc.). The *maven* is a Yiddish word, meaning the “accumulator of knowledge.” The mavens are the so-called “theoreticians” of a movement, the pundits and gurus, who can provide a cogent explanation of the current crisis based on their knowledge and observations. The salesmen are those, who through their power of persuasion can attract groups of followers. Although there are no specific boundaries separating these three groups of key individuals, any analysis of a global movement will clearly identify people with characteristics of all three.

In this article, I am going to concentrate on only one movement within the fourth wave, al-Qaeda. However, a careful look at all the other previous waves will clearly indicate the same pattern.

The grievances of the Muslim community (*Ummah*) have been acute for at least a century, since the days when the last Islamic Empire in Istanbul slipped into the pages of history books. After an impressive run that lasted over a thousand years and saw the conquest of almost the two thirds of the “known world,” beginning with the expulsion of the Moors in 1492 by the Spanish monarchy of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Islamic Empires started to experience defeat for the first time. The following half millennium saw a steady decline of the Islamic Empire, which was completed after WWI, with the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. Yet, this widespread realization did not immediately create violent rebellion along the lines of religious fundamentalism. The

collective frustration and anger felt in the Muslim world found its expression mostly through nationalistic yearnings, primarily as a result of the second wave of international terrorism. The so-called “jihadi” movement took shape slowly through the writings of the mavens, such as Hassan al-Bannah and Sayyid Qutb. [1] Although they failed to make much political impact outside of Egypt during their lifetimes, their writings inspired the scion of one of the wealthiest Arab families, Osama bin Laden. If we examine bin Laden’s life, we can clearly see why he would be the Great Connector. As a student in the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah young bin Laden was greatly influenced by his teachers, Abdallah Azzam and Muhammad Qutb, the younger brother of the fiery Islamist. His vast wealth and his connections to the Saudi royal family, gave bin Laden a ready platform, which an ordinary person would not have had. As a result, when the Afghan war started, with his influence and familiarity with the rich and the powerful, he could establish *al-Qaeda*, “the base,” which served as the bridge between the mujahidin fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan and their families in the Arab countries. Furthermore, he quickly established linkages with the Pakistani military intelligence service, the Inter service Intelligence Agency (ISI), which served as the conduit for the CIA to deliver money and weapons to the Afghan fighters. Apart from his personal wealth, bin Laden was also able to tap into the vast amount of charity money (*zakat*), generated within the Arab world, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf nations. Through his immense connections and seemingly inexhaustible funds, bin Laden was able to attract a large number of lieutenants, including the likes of Ayman al-Zawahiri and many others, who served as the salesmen of his jihadi ideology. Together, the mavens, the connectors, and the salesmen began the foundation of the fourth wave of international terrorism.

### *The message:*

The information age literally bombards us with innumerable pieces of information every single day of our lives. As we see, listen and/or read them, very few get through our conscious understanding. You may, for example, see a billboard while driving, a commercial while watching television or listen to a lecture, yet may recall absolutely nothing about the specific message they contain only a minute later. On the other hand, you may recall something you have heard, seen, or read many years ago. The question is, what causes some messages to stick? The secrets of stickiness have been the focus of research done by psychologists, communications specialists, and scholars from diverse disciplines. Heath and Heath (2002), for instance, identify six factors that cause messages to stick. They argue that a memorable message must be *simple, concrete, credible*, and have contents that are *unexpected*, they must appeal to our *emotions*, and should contain a compelling *storyline*.

Simplicity is one of the foremost requirements of a “sticky” message. In the area of political communication, where a leader attempts to inspire a large number of people, sticky messages depend on the simplicity of thought. When we look at the messages of bin Laden, we can clearly understand that in his vision: Islam is under threat from the infidel West, the Jews, and their collaborators in the Muslim world. All his communications, long and short, contain this message (Lawrence, 2005).

These messages are not simply a litany of grievances, but are concrete in their action plan: It is the religious duty of every Muslim to join the jihad against those who are putting the followers of the Prophet in peril.

The “unexpected” part of a memorable message comes when to the listeners the leader “connects the dots” and explains clearly the confusing world in which they live. To many in the Arab/Muslim world the message must come as a revelation, where they begin to see how the unbelievers have been undermining their rightful place in history. Through extreme cunning, the infidels not only sapped the energy of the Islamic Empire, but also are plotting to destroy it militarily, politically, financially, and even spiritually. This sudden realization often lies at the core of recruiting of new believers to the cause.

Coming from the son of one of the wealthiest families, living an ascetic life, waging war against injustice, bin Laden cuts a God-like image in the minds of many in the Arab/Muslim world. These images, often carefully chosen by al-Qaeda give his messages an immense and immediate credibility.

As human beings we remember messages that evoke emotions, particularly those that paint the portrait of an impending threat. Fear is most often the primary motivator for collective action. Evolutionary biologists bolster the findings of Prospect Theory offered by Kahneman and Tversky (1979). Prospect theory simply states that in the process of evaluating benefits and costs of an action, human beings often place a far greater weight on the fear of a loss than the prospect of a gain. Thus Heidt (2007: 29) points out: “If you were designing a

fish, would you have it respond as strongly to opportunities as to threats? No way. The cost of missing the sign of a nearby predator, however, can be catastrophic. Game over, end of the line of those genes.” Therefore, fear moves us in a profound way. Hence, it should come as little surprise that the messages of bin Laden would be strewn with dire predictions of a destroyed Islamic world, which are sure to pass when the believers fail to act (Olsson, 2008).

Finally, memorable messages come with stories. Experimental studies (Heath and Heath, 2007) show that when two similar messages are presented to an audience, one with supporting statistics and the other with a suitable story, the latter inevitably sticks more than the former. Any good public speaker knows the power of a storyline. Thus when someone evokes the name of the former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in the negotiating process, we immediately understand the follies of trying to appease an impeccable enemy. Similarly, the mere reference of Vietnam, Watergate, or the Edsel tells a storyline to the listener regarding a complex, yet perhaps a totally unrelated situation. Like all other political communicators, bin Laden’s speeches are chalk full of analogies of stories from Islamic history. Thus, when he calls the Westerners, “the Crusaders,” or George W. Bush, “Hulagu Khan,” their implications leave little doubt in the minds of his intended audience.

Thus, throughout history, the mavens have concocted coherent stories, by borrowing from religion, history, and mythology, with complete set of heroes and villains, good and evil, allies and enemies that have resonance with the masses. The connectors have spread it far and wide, and the salesmen have recruited eager volunteers.

### *The Context:*

There may be great messengers, but the sticky-ness of their message depends on their sociopolitical, historical, and cultural context. Rapoport (2006) himself points out three historical and cultural factors for the spread of at least one form of religious wave: Islamic fundamentalism. He argues that the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the beginning of a new Islamic century, and the Afghan War paved the way for it. The success of the Ayatollah Khomeini is bringing about a fundamental change in Iran by driving out the Shah, the closest US ally in the Islamic World, gave a tremendous impetus to many Muslim radicals to choose the path of violent revolution to drive out the infidels and the apostates. Second, a millenarian vision of the arrival of a redeemer coincided with the Iranian Revolution, giving the fundamentalists one more sign of a propitious time to rise up in the name of Allah. Finally, the Afghan War saw a victory for the Mujahideen against the mighty Soviet military. In their victory the religiously inspired totally disregarded the role that the covert US and Pakistani aid played. They simply took it as yet another sign of their inevitable victory.

In contrast to Rapoport’s emphasis on historical and cultural factors, social science analyses of social movements in general, and terrorism, in particular, concentrate on the macro level social, economic, and political variables (Keefer and Loayza, 2008). The presence of a large number of factors of structural imbalances, such as poverty, unemployment, income inequality, and lack of opportunities for political expression provided the youth in the Islamic world and those living in the Western nations the context within which the messages of bin Laden could be retained.

Finally, terrorism does not happen in a vacuum. The evolution of a violent movement is the outcome of a dynamic interaction between the target government and the dissident group. Being guided by the same process of over emphasizing the actual threat (Mueller, 2006) time and again governments fall into the trap of overreaction, which only reinforces the movement.

## **Inspiration and Opportunity: Looking at the Future**

In my explanation of waves I have included the charismatic connectors, the knowledgeable mavens, and the energetic salesmen. Although they explain the spread of ideas, fashions, or ideologies, there is one significant gap in the puzzle with regard to the spread of radicalism. While ideas spread and many get inspired only a few individuals actually join radical groups. Literature (Horgan, 2005; Sageman, 2008b) shows that regardless how inspired they are few people join violent dissident groups as a result of epiphany; most join slowly over time through friendship and kinship. When people get deeply affected by the sights of suffering of their own people and/or listening to inspiring speeches etc., they seek common friends or relatives through whom they get involved in political activism. O’Duffy (2008), for instance narrates the process of radicalization of Muslim youths in the UK. Yet, one curious phenomenon has generally escaped the notice of most researchers: there is

a significant difference in the rates of actual activism among the various national groups. Thus, while many young men and women from Pakistani background join these movements, few from Bangladeshi or Indian communities do so. On the other hand, young men and women from the Maghreb community, similar to the Pakistanis find ways to become active in such movements. This differential rate may be the outcome of opportunity. Let me explain.

Pakistan was created with a deep scar in its collective mind. Apart from the trauma of horrific mass killings that preceded the partition, it also inherited the persistent problem of Kashmir. Since the inherent logic of the partition based on religion might have dictated that the former Princely state would join Pakistan, history did not go that way. As a result, the Pakistani leaders from the beginning framed the Kashmir issue as an integral part of its national identity. Facing a much stronger enemy, Pakistan turned to the jihadis and, in effect, privatized its war of attrition (Swami, 2007). Since these terrorist training camps were established and administered with the full support of the Pakistani government and its intelligence service, the ISI (Stern 2003) they operated in the open; those who wanted to join them had full knowledge of their location. Similar training camps, built around extreme versions of Islam further flourished in the North West Frontier provinces, with blessings and resources from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States during the Afghan War against the Soviet military became the ready destination of all the “wannabe” jihadis. These camps provided unprecedented opportunities for the inspired all over the world. Apart from the jihadi training camps, radicalism blossomed in Islamic schools, the madrassahs, which were financially supported by Saudi Arabia as a part of their war of religious hegemony (Fair, 2008). By providing opportunity to the inspired, Pakistan quickly became known as the “most dangerous place on earth.”

Sageman (2008b: 85) finds, from his dataset of terrorist profiles, that most of the violent activists not only are of Pakistani background, but a disproportionate percentage comes from Mirpur district, a small area in Pakistani controlled Kashmir. These findings attest to his earlier (2004) “bunch of guys” hypothesis, where a group of (mostly) men join to create a cell and subsequently stick to their own group norms. These men may come together at a mosque, initially for no reason other than finding halal food or looking for people of their own language and culture. As they get to know one another many of them find a strong bond in a common enemy. Slowly they may form an informal group of like-minded individuals. Soon, in their vociferous vilification of the enemy they establish a bond among themselves. In effect, they create their own “echo chamber,” where only acceptable voices are heard and opinions reinforced. Those who disagree or hold contrary opinions, are quickly discouraged, leaving behind a hard core-group, which increasingly becomes more and more radicalized. They read, listen, or view materials that only buttress their own worldview.

These sorts of groupings are common in all social settings. However, if these radicalized members find a way to act upon their conviction, a terror cell is born. As groups are formed, leaders emerge. In the network process, they act as the nodes by making contact with other groups or the central core of a movement. As ideas spread, inspiration meets opportunity to produce terrorist attacks. This is why the establishment of a strong Taliban-dominated region in Pakistan poses a great security threat to the rest of the world (Hoffman, 2008, McConnel, 2008).

The conclusion that we can draw from this discussion is that the intelligence community needs to pay particular attention as to where groups can form, such as mosques, discussion groups, student unions, etc. Unfortunately, in a rapidly changing world, this task is likely to get harder, which will enable future waves to develop and spread far more quickly, and in turn be more difficult to manage. This is because of the pervasive nature of electronic communication. Today ideas can spread instantly and networks amongst like-minded people are rapidly developing around the world. As Robb (2007) points out, the nodes of communication networks not only become sources of information exchange, they, in effect, become “small worlds” of virtual communities on the web. Through their interactions, they develop social capital, provide ideological and emotional support to their members, raise money, disseminate dangerous information regarding explosives, and keep the fire of hatred burning. Nearly three decades ago, when bin Laden began his jihad, his power to connect was limited by his physical ability to meet with influential people in the disaffected parts of the Arab/Muslim world. The next generation of connectors will increase this capacity infinitely through the rapid advance of communication technologies. More importantly, these new connectors may not even need the large sums of money and family connections that helped bin Laden to establish al-Qaeda. Currently, there is a debate among terrorism experts on how significant al-Qaeda as an organization actually is (Sageman, 2008, McConnel, 2008; Hoffman, 2008). Regardless where the truth lies, however, experts of all stripes clearly warn us that when the next wave comes, or as this wave continues, the “jihadis”, whether completely leaderless or part of a hierarchical organization,

will continue to pose an unprecedented threat to the global security. The essence of human nature will continue to cause us to form groups and fight against other groups. In the open savanna, humanity survived by forming groups. Our future survival will depend on how well we can manage the destructive power of groups.

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## NOTES:

[1] The word jihad has a specific religious connotation. Not all Muslims accept the way the radicals have used the term. By accepting the term to label radical Islam, we may actually give it more legitimacy than it deserves. However, since all other alternatives to the expression, such as “Salafis”, “fundamentalists,” “extremists,” or “literalists” carry their own limitations, I will use the term “jihadi” in this article being mindful of its political and religious limitations.

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